

## [Al Thayer]

ONE COPY WITH THE WOODRUM COMMITTEE Living Folklore 18 Beliefs and Customs - Folkstuff HARLEM PARTIES

as told to Frank Byrd

by Al Thayer

“Well, almost anybody will tell you that the gayest thing about Harlem in the old days (during the Prohibition Era) was its hectic parties. Everybody had them and they were thrown on the slightest provocation. Anybody's homecoming, dispossess notice, marriage or divorce was a more than reasonable excuse for a party.

Harlemites socialites and their conduct, in short, were much on the order of lower Manhattan's gay “400”. Both thought and acted alike: jittery, sophisticated and inevitably bored. I had my fun along with the rest of them. Life was soft for any unattached young male with a passable wardrobe, a smooth line of chatter and a flair for the latest dances. It was a cinch to get invited from one week-end party to another, where all expenses were footed by a fat, half-amorous hostess. It was also quite easy to put the bite on ones dull host for a ten or a twenty (never to be repaid, of course) whenever these affairs rolled around. I have even wangled myself a berth as a house-guest for as long as three or four months at a time. It was a soft living for all young writers, artists, struggling musicians and pseudo intellectuals. They were the fad in Harlem. Sponsoring them was 2 definitely the smart, fashionable thing, a real diversion for the social upper-crust.

I remember one child whose parties I always loved to attend. They were so screwy and inconsistent that they were a never failing source of amusement—just like the person who

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gave them—little Dixie Lee, whom I am sure, all the Harlem old-timers remember with a deep, sincere affection.

It was the last party she ever gave, and typical of all the rest. Robert Van Doren came and, to the surprise of every one, brought his wife, Sonia, instead of the chorus boy that was his current weakness; Mamie Jones, Harlem's perennial two-hundred pound play girl, had called while in the midst of a shower and when she learned that the party was already underway, took just time enough to slip on a bathrobe and mules, grab two bottles of scotch and hop into her roadster; Jay Clayton, the Customs inspector, who like everyone else, had forgotten when he was last sober, came breathless, hatless, and coatless, his bald head shiny with perspiration—somewhere enroute, he had fastened on to Pearl Black, currently popular for her Pulitzer prize novel that had been dramatized, and presented by the Theatre Guild; Muriel Payne, author and lecturer, resplendent in blood-red transparent velvet and sporting a long ivory cigarette holder, tripped in escorted by her jet-black grinning gigolo; Lady Nancy [Aintree?], garbed in bright red baret, flat-heeled shoes and a noisy hued gingham dress sauntered in on the arm of big Bill Johnson, the Negro sculptor just back in Harlem after three years in the gay haunts of Montmartre—he had apparently neither shaved nor had a hair cut in all that time.

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Martha Lomax, uptown New York's buxom, good-time night-life czarina, closed shop, bundled her girls into a fleet of taxis and put in her appearance to help celebrate Dixie's triumphant home coming from the country. A dress house customer, his curiosity aroused, bribed her to bring him along; Rusty Freeman, who had just completed a work-out at the gymnasium, came in a high-necked purple sweater and boasted a beautiful eye to match; after the Broadway opening of a new Black and Tan musical, Ethel Rainey, the blues singer, came locked in arms with the leading lady's understudy; Paul White, ex-prizefighter and singer, brought the ex-mayor's girl friend; Cherry McAlpin, who headed the uptown list of socially elite matrons sent the party into an uproar when she put in her appearance with her dapper physician husband in tow, thereby shattering a local precedent of ten

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years standing; young Reverend Milton Mallory, whose pugistically inclined wife kept him constantly indisposed, nursing black-eyes, fractured ribs and other minor injuries, restored things to normal by finally showing up with the person everyone expected him to bring—his chauffeur's wife. There was a shortage of men, so Ace Glassman, the party wit, went down into the street and hailed two taxi drivers who willingly came in but soon admitted that the pace was too much for them.

It was a motley crowd, but they did not seem to mind each other. By midnight, the party was officially declared a success. Jeff, Dixie's boyfriend, insisted on making a round of the night clubs, however; so they piled into all the cars that were available, commandeered passing taxicabs for the leftovers, 4 and ten minutes later, all were comfortably seated at and noisily pounding on the tops of ring-side tables at the Cotton Pickers Club. (Several hours later, those who did not go home and all who were able to, did the same thing in another club. What club it was, nobody knew nor apparently seemed to care.)

On the floor at the Cotton Pickers Club, however, a chocolate-brown girl with full breasts, a strong voice and swinging hips was singing. When she reached the high notes, large veins stood out on her throat and her voice became huskier than ever. After a series of slow sensual choruses, the band doubled its tempo and the girl began to tap dance—flinging herself wildly and indiscriminately in every direction. Her breasts juggled up and down, all out of time with the rythm of her feet.

My mind was in a whirl and I found it increasingly difficult to hold my head up, yet I was vaguely aware of the thumping music, the prancing waiters and Dixie's boisterous friends. Suddenly I wanted to get away from all of this but could not seem to get up. 'Damn this crowd, anyhow!' I thought. 'Just a lot of damn smirking, highbrows doing back-flips trying to be funny.' What the hell did they get our of it? Oh, to hell with them, anyway—they didn't mean anything to me, I thought. I'd probably never see half of them again.

Somebody poured me another drink. Automatically I drank it.

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'You look sleepy, Jeff. Are you?' I heard Dixie ask Jeff.

'Well, I could stand a wink or two. Couldn't [you?]'

'Don't tell me you're ready to leave so soon?'

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'Sure, why not?'

'Listen gang.' Jay Allen chirped, 'little Jeffie wants to go home.'

'Dear! Dear!' cooed Van Doren mockingly, 'Does he want his mama to tuck him in?'

'Naw.' Ace said menacingly, 'He's had experience with them kinda mama's.'

No one answered, or seemed to hear this. Then Lady Nancy piped up brightly—'That's it, lets all tuck the dear boy in!'

'Aw be your age, Aintree.' Ace said, turning away.

Lady Nancy was properly shocked but she would not give Ace the satisfaction of knowing it.

There was more entertainment, but it was entirely wasted on Dixie's party. They had a little show all their own that was beginning to provide serious competition for the house entertainers. Finally, they trailed/ out into the street. It was dawn. Jay, making a little desperate effort for the spot-light, climbed into a waiting milk wagon and drove down Lenox Avenue flourishing one of the women's evening wraps in his best charioteer fashion and announcing his wares to all sundry in a gin-hoarsened tenor. The others, between bursts of laughter and handclaps of approval, climbed into their cars or waiting taxicabs and drove away.

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You probably remember “Young” Johnny Morano. He had made quite a name for himself “in the racket” and admitted it. It was a name to be reckoned with too—even in Chicago where he had finally set up headquarters. His few visits to New York marked the occasion for high revelry behind certain closed doors. Whenever he condescended to make a public appearance, it was the signal in Harlem night life circles, for a welcome of splendor befitting the arrival of a local big shot.

Well, Johnny accepted it all with a silent dignity—a dignity that he thought becoming to the successor of “Tough” Tony Morano, his brother. He felt better than he had felt in many moons and his feelings were reflected in his face this night. He entered the Cotton Pickers Club to a burst of cheers and applause. He went from table to table greeting those of his old friends whom he recognized, but he never drank with them. He always drank alone. That was one of his hard and fast rules. He never was entirely alone, however, no matter how much he appeared to be. If you looked closely enough, you noticed a group of three or four silent but unusually alert young men hovering somewhere in the immediate background.

I'll never forget it even though I was pretty high. Until Johnny saw Dixie and Jeff, his face was a flushed picture of happiness; then it suddenly changed into a colorless mask with a thin white line for lips. He stopped, wheeled about and walked through a door near the orchestra platform. The silent, hardfaced young men followed him. Well, I suppose you know that Dixie Lee was once “Tough” Tony's girl and that during a fight in her apartment with Jeff Davis, Tony had been shot and killed while scuffling for possession of a gun. It was in all the papers.

Johnny spoke a few crisp words to his attentive young men. They did not answer him but two of them lighted cigarettes and sat down. The other two adjusted their hats, buttoned their tight-fitting spring coats and walked out into the street.

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When Jeff and Dixie and I got into a cab, the two young men slouched in a long, blue sedan with soft felt hats tilted over their eyes. I saw them but thought nothing of it.

At the entrance to Dixie's apartment house, we stepped out of the cab; Jeff paid the driver and the three of us started in. This same blue sedan, rolling down the wet street, paused momentarily and sped away. During that few seconds hesitation, several shots rang out. At the first shot, Jeff dropped quickly to the ground and the next minute Dixie slumped down into his arms. The doorman who had gone inside the building came running out. A cop came also. Jeff told him what had happened. He called an ambulance.

While they were waiting for the ambulance, they carried Dixie inside and Jeff did what he could to make her comfortable. When the ambulance came, we climbed in with her. Jeff's face was a picture of agony and despair. Dixie smiled up at him and tried to put her arms around his neck but she couldn't. She sank back into the pillows.

'Don't worry about me, darling', she said. 'I'll be all right.'

The ambulance swerved into the courtyard of Harlem Hospital. Two attendants took Dixie in on a stretcher. The doctor told us to wait in the hall and we sat down on a bench. Finally the doctor came out and motioned us into the room where Dixie lay. Jeff looked at her and held her in his arms.

She looked all right but in back of her, the doctor was shaking his head. The next minute we know what he was trying to say.

Outside Jeff said: 'It just don't seem possible. Only last night she was so alive and happy. I had never seen her so happy.'"